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Edwin Markham
wrote
"The Man With a
Hoe"

J. F. Millet

The Man With a Hoe:

An Essay in Interpretation

BY

Wm. Dallam Armes.

A picture is the painter's incarnation of his thoughts in symbols of form and colour.

George Henry Lewes.

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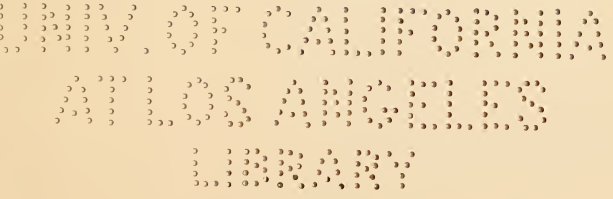

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"As Every Grain of Gold is Gold,
So Every Grain of Truth is Truth."

Whatever in this little work is worthy of so high an honor, I dedicate, in reverence and admiration, to him who has devoted his life and fortune to the service of humanity,

to JOHN RUSKIN.

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SAN CÁRLOS 1769

ROBERT ERNEST COWAN

Some tell me that I deny the charms of the country. I find much more than charms,—I find infinite glories. I see as well as they do the little flowers of which Christ said that Solomon, in all his glory, was not arrayed like one of these. I see the halos of dandelions, and the sun, also, which spreads out beyond the world its glory in the clouds. But I see as well, in the plain, the steaming horses at work, and in a rocky place a man all worn out, whose "*han!*" has been heard since morning, and who tries to straighten himself a moment and breathe. The drama is surrounded by beauty.

Jean-François Millet.

We smile at the epigram that Mezzofanti, the distinguished Italian linguist, could speak a hundred and twenty languages, but could say nothing in any of them, because we realize that language is merely a means to an end; that facility in picking up vocabulary and forms is a decidedly second-rate accomplishment; and that the ability to utter commonplaces and platitudes in several languages is one that the polyglot shares with sailors, donkey-boys, and parrots. But comparatively few realize that every art, using the term in the narrow sense, is but a means of expression; that the painter that has mastered technique has also but learned a method of giving concrete representation to his beliefs, ideals, and aspirations; that without something more than the mere manual dexterity to copy accurately what is placed before him, he produces work no more admira-

ble than that of any other handicraft requiring a quick, correct eye, and a trained, obedient hand. "Any one that can learn to write can learn to draw," says one of the best of the manuals; and in nine cases out of ten the performance will be exactly on a par with that of the professional writing master, it might have added. The "something more" may be, generally is, merely a poetical sensitiveness to the beauty everywhere around us, but overlooked by us grosser mortals; the painter may simply glorify the commonplace by showing us the really important in the apparently trivial, the essentially beautiful in the superficially ugly.

> Art was given for that —
> God uses us to help each other so,
> Lending our minds out;

and the artist that thus deepens our joy in life and its surroundings is certainly doing a worthy work that entitles him to the gratitude of every one whose pleasure he has increased, or whose burden he has lightened. But when he 'draws higher things with the same truth'; when he 'takes the Prior's pulpit-place, interprets God to all of us';

when to perfect mastery of technique, passionate admiration of beauty, and delicate selective instinct, he adds an earnest, reverent spirit, warm human sympathy, and a noble philosophy of life, he produces works of a far higher value,—works that the world will not willingly let die.

Back of all art, whatever may be the means of expression that the possession of special aptitudes leads him to employ, stands the artist himself, and the greatness of his work will always be strictly commensurate with the greatness of his soul. Unconsciously to himself, perhaps, his personal idiosyncrasies and predilections tinge all that he does, and to expect noble art from an ignoble man is to expect figs from thistles. For better or for worse, *le style est de l'homme même.* No man escapes from himself: the Madonnas of the sensualist are but draped Venuses; Titian's Penitent Magdalene has yet to learn the meaning of the word repentance; Rubens's Greek goddesses are coarse and vulgar; Bernini's angels are of the flesh fleshly. On the other hand, the pure, sweet soul of Fra Angelico speaks from every stroke

of his brush; Donatello's dancing and singing children mirror the frankness and simplicity of the sculptor's mind; and

> The hand that rounded Peter's dome,
> And groined the aisles of Christian Rome,
> Wrought in a sad sincerity;
> Himself from God he could not free.

In literature, as in life, we rank earnestness, morality, and modesty, far above flippancy, sensuality, and arrogance. Ford is ranked below Shakspere because of the lower moral tone of his plays; Johnson above Steele because of his deeper earnestness. What is the peculiarity distinguishing paint from printer's ink, the vibrations of stretched catgut from the vibrations of the vocal chords, the enduring embodiment of a thought from its fleeting symbol, that prevents our judging the manifestations of man's spirit in painting, music, sculpture, and architecture, according to the same criterion? Was "art for art's sake" ever applied to anything but a clever triviality?

Two things, then, are to be considered in every picture: the *motif*, the basal idea; and the *technique*, the expression

of the idea. Speaking broadly, it may be said that the works of the earliest masters — Cimabue, Giotto, and their immediate followers — were filled with noble sentiment and faulty drawing; that modern art is wellnigh perfect in technique, but trivial and barren. The old religious feeling that inspired so many of the greatest masterpieces is no longer an active, living faith,— at least, not among modern French artists,— and there is little in contemporaneous life to take its place. In this restless, self-conscious age the simplicity, serenity, and sincerity, of Greek sculpture and early Italian painting are almost lost qualities.

Feeling this lack, and disgusted with the superficiality, faulty faultlessness, and personal self-display, of modern art, a few painters, deliberately forgetting their superior technique, give us the incorrect drawing, lack of perspective, and ungraceful "stained-glass" attitudes, of the early masters, hoping that amid the dross the pure gold may lie hid. With the Charity of Puvis de Chavannes, the Ecce Ancilla Domini, the Girlhood of Mary Virgin in mind, who will say that

they do not sometimes succeed? But surely the painter that, forgetting naught, suppressing naught, attains the same sincerity; that unites the simplicity and self-effacement of Bellini or Carpaccio with the perfect execution of modern French art, is of a higher type. And such a man was Jean-François Millet.

The Man with a Hoe was generally conceded to be far and away the most important canvas in the late exhibition; but its superiority over the facile prettiness of Bouguereau, the clever "effectiveness" of Gerome, and the smooth inanity of Cabanel, is not, I take it, a superiority of technique. Considered merely as a painted representation of things seen, it is, to be sure, a great work of art; considered in its deeper meaning, it is a work of great art.

"Well, they call that a great painting! Why, there is n't a bit of expression in the face, and I can't see the eye at all. The man looks like an idiot!" was a remark heard before the picture.

"Yes," was the answer; "he 's a mere animal. I suppose it 's true to nature; but why could n't the artist have chosen a prettier model?"

Possibly the reason was that he had no intention of producing a pretty picture. Can it be believed that a painter of such insight and accuracy as Millet elsewhere in this picture shows himself to be, overlooked what is thus apparent to the most superficial observer; that he did not know that his peasant is ugly and awkward, having more in common with the beasts of the field than with Voltaire and Victor Hugo, Laplace and Pasteur, Pascal and St. Louis; that he could not see that the picture not only is not pleasing, but is positively repulsive? Surely, we may assume that Millet knew all this, and pass to the further question: How came an artist to paint such a picture, deliberately to prefer ugliness to beauty, awkwardness to grace? The answer that Millet was a realist, and painted what he actually saw, is hardly an adequate one. Realism is not necessarily ugliness or triviality; it is merely truth to nature; and "there are other truths besides coats and waistcoats, pots and pans, drawing-rooms and suburban villas." *What* he sees depends on the artist himself. This world is full of beauty, and the painter that deliber-

ately prefers to portray the ugly must justify his choice, be he realist, idealist, conventionalist, impressionist, or what not. If there is sufficient reason for the preference ; if the painter has some important lesson to teach, some great truth to bring home to men's business and bosoms, and if only the ugly will express his meaning or answer his purpose, he may be justified ; otherwise not. The Gothic gargoyle has a sufficient *raison d'etre;* that sensual, leering face on the Venetian Santa Maria Formosa only reflects the bestiality of its maker's mind. To show that Millet's choice *can* be justified ; that the ugliness is essential, not accidental ; that the uncouth alone would answer his purpose, is the object of the present essay.

Born and reared among peasants, Millet knew by sad experience the hardships of their laborious, joyless lives. Others, drawing their inspiration from Vergil and Theocritus, might paint the shepherd piping to his flock, the refined young laborer wooing the lady-like dairy maid, the village festivity under the trees, the dance on the green ; he knew only the weary shepherd caring for his

flock in the bleak, cutting wind; the uncouth Potato-diggers; the unchildish Goose-tender; the hardly human Man with a Hoe. He painted the life as he knew it in all its hideousness and repulsiveness, the strongest of his pictures being the one under consideration. Let us see what it represents.

Leaning on his short-handled hoe, a common laborer is resting for a moment to ease his back from the pain caused by continual stooping at his task of preparing a bit of waste land for cultivation: one of the lowest class in society, of the substratum on which the whole fabric rests, is represented engaged in the lowest work of agriculture. Next year, in consequence of this man's labor, two blades of grass will grow where one now grows; and every man in the realm, up to Napoleon the Little himself, on his stolen gilt gingerbread throne, will receive benefit, inappreciable perhaps, but none the less real, from this man's toil. Along the whole line, from lowest to highest, through all grades of society, will be felt the good effects of his having subdued to man's service yet a bit more of Mother Earth. The benefactor

of humanity — he is no less! And how does society reward its benefactor? Why, when, in a few moments, the dull backache is somewhat more bearable, he'll go at his wearisome toil again; and when it gets too dark to work, he'll go home to his squalid hut, eat his meager supper of coarse food, and in utter physical exhaustion, fling himself on his straw — for what? To seek in sleep sufficient strength to pass the morrow in the same manner. And next week he'll bring under cultivation yet a little more waste land; and next year a little more; and next decade a little more; till at last he gives up the unequal contest, and is shoveled under the earth that he has struggled so long to subdue. His face expresses no emotion,— what emotion should it express? Joy, think you? Or hope? His father and his father's father labored thus before him, and for aught that he can see, his children's children will but continue his work. Expression denotes intelligence, and what time has he for the cultivation of the God-given intellect that alone distinguishes him from the brutes that he compels to his service? He hardly real-

izes that he has such a thing. Is it any wonder that a church that promises simply *everlasting rest*, of which the momentary cessation of work during the ringing of the Angelus is the type, has so deep a hold on this people?

This, then, is the reward that society bestows upon her benefactor in this boastful nineteenth century, in the most highly civilized nation in the world,—barely the means of subsistence, that he may keep alive to continue to benefit her! In France, mother of arts and sciences; in gay, light-hearted, vivacious France, with its "civilizing mission," thousands of men and women, formed in the image of their Maker, and equal in His sight with the courtliest gentlemen and most gracious ladies of the land, thus wear out their lives in exhausting, soul-stupefying labor, that one may pass his time in luxurious idleness, devising schemes for spending his income or for warding off ennui! And in a social system based on the rule of the old border foragers,

> That they should take who have the power,
> And they should keep who can,

the mass of mankind tamely acquiesces; as if "the wasteful straitness and blank absence of outlook or hope of the millions, who come on to the earth that greets them with no smile, and then stagger blindly under dull burdens for a season, and at last are shoveled silently back under the ground," were necessary concomitants of any possible social order; as if "the perfection of social blessedness" had once for all been achieved! After all, is not Carlyle right; was not Gurth, born thrall to Cedric the Saxon and certain of his share of the bacon, better off than the modern worker, born thrall to a social system that to the unceasing labor of the slave adds the harrassing uncertainty of gaining even the means of subsistence? Is the "freedom" of the laborer of the present day more than a nominal one? Has he not been "robbed of the substance and fooled with the shadow"?

In Millet the lower classes found a voice to protest against the monstrous inequalities of the present social order. To a people filled with ideas of country life drawn from eclogues, idyls, and pastorals, he revealed the bitter truth. Of

the wealthy, pleasure-loving Parisians, this picture asked, "Can you devise no means by which the poor, whose toil enables you to live in ease and luxury, may enjoy at least the comforts of life?" Their only answer was to refuse The Man with a Hoe admission to the salon because of its socialistic tendencies,—and six years later Paris was in the hands of the Commune. No Œdipus having yet arisen to solve the riddle, to every thinking man this voice from the peasantry still cries. In vain do we shrug our shoulders and murmur, "So hath it been; so be it. Though the times may be out of joint, we were not born to set them right"; in our heart of hearts we cannot forget the fate of him who asked, "Am I my brother's keeper?" *De te fabula!* cries conscience.

To say that the picture preaches socialism is, however, merely to acknowledge that in the depths of your own soul, though perhaps only thus unconsciously are you willing to confess it, there is a lurking belief that in some form of socialism is to be found the future welfare of the human race. Mil-

let proposes no scheme, spreads no propaganda. He is destructive, not constructive. He merely points out the evil, and leaves it for others to find the remedy. Small wonder, however, that by those of the lower classes that still retain some gleams of intelligence, spite of their grinding, stupefying toil, the red flag is unfurled; and that schemes of communism, socialism, nay, even of anarchy, must be put down at the point of the bayonet and the mouth of the cannon. But one might as well try to stay the incoming tide with mop and bucket. Some change must come, and as one of the wisest of English statesmen has written, "It is only the faith that we are moving slowly away from the existing order, as our ancestors moved slowly away from the old want of order, that makes the present endurable, and any tenacious effort to raise the future possible."

By whatever means it may be accomplished, whether by a modification of the present social system, or by "grasping the sorry scheme of things entire, and shattering it to bits," Heaven hasten the day when no peasant-painter anywhere

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on this fair earth will have cause to utter such a protest against man's inhumanity to man; when the interest in The Man with a Hoe will be merely technical and antiquarian.

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